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James Bow
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Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
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Oral History Collection

James Bow

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Mesquite, Texas

Date: February 4, 1976

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Mr. James Bow for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on February 4, 1976, in Mesquite, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Bow in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions while he was at Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack there on December 7, 1941.

Now Mr. Bow, to begin this interview, very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born--things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Bow: I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1917. I stayed there all my life until the war started.

Dr. Marcello: Are you of Chinese ancestry?

Mr. Bow: Yes, I am. I went to school over there up to the twelfth grade. During the European trouble, you know, I decided I would be caught in the draft, so I enlisted in the Naval Reserve, Hawaiian Unit.

This Hawaiian Unit was composed of all Hawaiian boys.

Marcello: Why did you decide to enter the Naval Reserve as opposed to the Army or one of the other branches?

Bow: Well, I was a sea scout at one time, and I figured, "Well, I know all about the sea and seamanship, so I guess I'll join the Naval Reserve."

Marcello: Okay. Do you remember exactly when you joined the Naval Reserve?

Bow: December, 1940.

Marcello: In other words, about a year before the war actually started.

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: What sort of training did you undergo as a member of the Naval Reserve there in the Hawaiian Islands?

Bow: Well, in Hawaii there were no boot camps. We just got aboard ship and learned the hard way from scratch.

Marcello: In other words, it was almost strictly on-the-job training.

Bow: Right.

Marcello: What sort of a ship were you training on?

Bow: Well, the first ship I went on was the USS Regulus. It was a cargo ship. It was in May, 1940, that we made our first trip. We went to Wake Island, and we took a bunch of construction workers and a bunch of

Marines down there at the same time. We stayed there two weeks, I believe.

Marcello: In other words, this was the contingent that was going to Wake Island in order to build up the fortifications and so forth.

Bow: That is right.

Marcello: At the time that you entered the service, did you think very much about the possibility of ever getting into a war with Japan?

Bow: No, it was just a precaution, you know, that the United States was taking. So we got in this Naval Reserve to, you know, be prepared.

Marcello: Now when you were in this Naval Reserve unit, were you still living at home, or were you assigned permanently to the ship or to a station, or exactly how did that work?

Bow: I was assigned to the receiving ship at Pearl Harbor. On weekends I'd go on home. But I did all my duty at Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: This Naval Reserve unit kind of intrigues me. You mentioned that it was made up entirely of Hawaiians.

Bow: All the local boys. By that I mean there were white men, colored, Hawaiians, part Portuguese, Chinese, Korean.

Marcello: Probably even some Japanese.

Bow: No, that was the only thing that the Navy did not accept.

Marcello: They would not allow Japanese in the unit?

Bow: Right. I mean including the Army. I don't think there was any in there.

Marcello: That's right. There was a Hawaiian National Guard, also, was there not?

Bow: Right.

Marcello: Do you recall if any Japanese actually ever applied to get in the Naval Reserve unit?

Bow: Not that I know of.

Marcello: Did this Naval Reserve unit have a more specific designation?

Bow: Well, it was a whole unit, but there was a bunch of fellows that were assigned to different, you know, duties. But when it was over we all lived in the same barracks. Like they'll take five people and ship them out. They'll do all the duty for maybe two weeks, and they'll come back to the base. That's the way it worked.

Marcello: Okay, you mentioned that your first sea tour took you to Wake Island, and then I assume you returned to Pearl Harbor?

Bow: Yes. After that Wake Island deal, we got back to Pearl Harbor and I was assigned back to the base. After a short term, why, we were moved down to this

section base at Bishops Point. We were connected with net tenders. The duties of the net tender were . . . at the entrance of Pearl Harbor, they pulled the gates to let the ships in and then close it. Our duty . . . I was on a patrol craft. We would patrol between the buoys outside the nets. Any intruder had to answer to us first.

Marcello: What sort of intruders were you possibly looking for?

Bow: Small fishing boats, anyone that was not allowed in that restricted area.

Marcello: How far or how large was that restricted area outside the nets?

Bow: At that time I think we were patrolling from buoy eight to buoy nine, which was quite a difference. That patrol duty consisted of three men in that one boat. It was a twenty-four-hour duty.

Marcello: What sort of a boat were you patrolling in?

Bow: Well, we called it the Aku-head, which was the name we gave this boat. It was a regular Navy whale boat, I call it.

Marcello: You called it Aku-head?

Bow: Aku, which is the Hawaiian name for tuna.

Marcello: I see.

Bow: If you said you had duty on the Aku-head, well, everybody knew that it was a patrol boat. I was a signalman

striker then, you know, and a seaman. We had a coxswain and a motor mechanic--three of us.

Marcello: How well-armed was this boat?

Bow: The coxswain carried a pistol--a .45--and I carried a rifle. That was it.

Marcello: How many of these little boats were there that did patrolling outside the submarine nets?

Bow: One boat.

Marcello: In other words, one boat that was on duty did all the partolling.

Bow: That was it, yes. Then we changed duty, and another three men get on, and they patrol twenty-four hours. They'd come back in, and then another three would go out, you know. You have a unit of three.

Marcello: In other words, you would get the duty every three days.

Bow: Something like that.

Marcello: And you would be patrolling for twenty-four hours.

Bow: Twenty-four hours a day.

Marcello: Now did this sort of routine continue right up until the actual Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor?

Bow: That's right--up to the time they attacked, which was on December 7. Thereafter the patrol ceased because everything was, you know, tight then. Right after the raid, I stayed on the base for another two weeks, and then I got transferred.

Marcello: But this routine didn't change even when relations between the United States and Japan got rather bad? You were still pulling those twenty-four hour patrols?

Bow: Yes. Up to that day, yes, we were still patrolling, you know. But after the raid, why, everything ceased.

Marcello: Did you have very much contact with the actual Japanese who lived on the Hawaiian Islands at this time?

Bow: No. Of course, in Pearl Harbor they were not allowed to work there. That's the way I understand it. They could not work in the harbor.

Marcello: When you were a young boy growing up, did you have very much contact with the Japanese at that time, that is, before you actually got into the Naval Reserve?

Bow: Oh, yes, all my friends were Japanese. I got along pretty good with them. Even my next door neighbor was Japanese.

Marcello: Did you personally ever have any reason to suspect that these Japanese might commit some sort of sabotage in case war broke out between the two countries?

Bow: No, not the slightest idea. I thought they were trustworthy people.

Marcello: About how many people were in that Hawaiian Reserve unit altogether?

Bow: Well, let's see. Probably two hundred.

Marcello: Now as a reserve unit, I would assume that most of the functions that this unit performed were shore functions or perhaps duty of the sort that you had.

Bow: It was half-and-half. It was part shore and part sea duty.

Marcello: What did you do during the period when you were not patrolling outside the antisubmarine net?

Bow: I worked in the net depot.

Marcello: What sort of work was done in there?

Bow: Well, in the net depot we would repair the nets. We helped the boatswain's mate. He was in charge. We helped him whenever he needed help, you know, like getting equipment here and helping him pull the lines and doing all that kind of stuff.

Marcello: Those antisubmarine nets kind of intrigue me. How were they made and how did they work?

Bow: Well, they're made of wire cable which is about . . .

Marcello: About an inch thick?

Bow: About an inch thick. They have some kind of machine where they could splice the thing. It's so many feet long--I don't know how many feet--fifty, sixty. It's about that deep (gesture), I mean that wide, like a

tennis court net. But the eyes of the cable are about that round (gesture).

Marcello: About a foot and a half round, in other words.

Bow: Yes, and they all interlaced, you know, like a . . .

Marcello: How do they open and close that net?

Bow: Well, up in the entrance of the harbor there's a barge. They have equipment or machinery where they could lower the thing and re crank it back up. On the other side of the canal, there's another one there that holds it while the main station lowers it and pulls it, you know?

Marcello: About how wide was that channel where the antisubmarine net was? You would have to estimate this, of course.

Bow: Well, two ships could pass through it. You have to go curving around before you get to the entrance--like the side of the Trinity River downtown.

Marcello: So it wasn't very wide then.

Bow: At that point it's not too wide, so that's a good place to put that net.

Marcello: Now was that net closed all the time, that is, up until a ship was ready to enter or leave the harbor?

Bow: The gate was closed all the time until a ship was ready to go out and the signals are being, you know, made . . . the ship approaching the gate, when he gets up to a certain point, then it opens up. Then the ship passes through, and they close it.

Marcello: And that would be the same procedure everytime a ship comes in.

Bow: Right.

Marcello: And every ship that went in or out of Pearl Harbor had to go through those antisubmarine nets.

Bow: They've got to go through that net.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you were patrolling outside those nets. How large an area were you patrolling?

Bow: Let's see.

Marcello: You mentioned that you went from one buoy to another buoy but . . . you'd have to estimate. How much of an area would you be covering? Would it be more than a mile?

Bow: It could be. It could be a mile. There were a lot of buoys there. We'd make a pass straight down this way (gesture), and sometimes we'd just go around in circles just to break the monotony of, you know . . .

Marcello: Did you ever have to stop very many boats that were getting in this restricted area?

Bow: No, but we passed them sometimes, you know, and we'd know that they were our own, so we don't challenge them. At night very few boats go through there--small boats, that is. But in the daytime once in awhile we see small crafts. I don't know what they were doing out there, but they were Navy boats.

Marcello: Did you ever stop any Japanese fishing vessels that perhaps looked suspicious or anything of that nature?

Bow: We didn't encounter any of those.

Marcello: In other words, for the most part the civilian boats were staying out of that area.

Bow: Yes, it was a restricted area. As soon as you get up to the edge of Pearl Harbor, it's a restricted area, that is, from the open sea. As soon as you approach the shoreline, it's a restricted area.

Marcello: Okay, how often did you get liberty?

Bow: Well, it varied, you know. Sometimes I'd get a Saturday and a Sunday off, and sometimes I'd go two weeks without getting anything.

Marcello: And did this sort of liberty routine continue right up until Pearl Harbor.

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: What sort of activities did you engage in when you went on liberty? What did you do when you went on liberty?

Bow: Well, since I lived there, I'd just go on home and go with some friends down to the beach for swimming, surfing, you know.

Marcello: Now in your case you probably could stay the entire weekend, if you had the entire weekend off, since you had a place to stay in Honolulu.

Bow: Yes, I'd always go on home.

Marcello: I know in the case of the men who were on the ships, they got either a port or a starboard liberty. They usually had to be back aboard ship at twelve o'clock.

Bow: Right.

Marcello: But in your case . . .

Bow: I could go on overnight. As long as you had a permanent address, why, you could go on home and stay there till the next day.

Marcello: Okay, that more or less brings us up to the actual attack on Pearl Harbor itself. What I want you to do at this point is to describe to me in as much detail as you can remember what your routine was on Saturday, December 6, 1941, that is, the day before Pearl Harbor. Then we'll talk about the Sunday. But let's start with Saturday, December 6, 1941. From the time you got up in the morning until you went to bed that night, describe what your routine was.

Bow: Well, on Saturday I had the duty. Three of us got in this boat. We relieved the crew that was coming off.

Marcello: What time did your duty start on Saturday morning?

Bow: Eight o'clock. We went out and patrolled the area. We only travelled about four or five knots--just real slow, you know, because it was a twenty-four-hour deal. When we did our twenty-four hours, well, we came back the next morning.

Marcello: Did you see anything out of the ordinary that day?

Bow: During Saturday everything looked normal.

Marcello: Is this a rather monotonous job after awhile?

Bow: It is. It's just a tiresome job.

Marcello: Did you have binoculars or anything like that in order to check around with?

Bow: Yes, we had binoculars. Every now and then we'd look around and see who was going by or things like that.

Marcello: But is it the type of job where you could become very lax because it was so monotonous?

Bow: I guess you could say that we could get lax. But being three men in the boat, we'd just talk to each other and look around.

Marcello: Okay, now you mentioned that you went on duty Saturday morning at eight o'clock, which meant that you wouldn't be relieved until the next morning at eight o'clock. Is that right?

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: Now let's move into the dawn hours of December 7, 1941, and pick up your routine from that particular period.

Bow: Well, when dawn came everything was normal. We came back to the dock, and the crew to relieve us was already there. We all reported back to the barracks.

Marcello: Now did any Navy vessels pass in and out of the nets during that twenty-four-hour period when you were on patrol?

Bow: We saw some ships out there on the horizon, which was a destroyer.

Marcello: Was this the Ward?

Bow: It was the Ward, yes. He was always out there on the horizon. We could see them everyday out there. They were just patrolling back and forth, back and forth, you know.

Marcello: Well, now is it not true that the Ward actually spotted one of the midget submarines?

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: Did your little patrol craft get involved in any of that activity at all?

Bow: No.

Marcello: Did you know what was going on?

Bow: No. They probably spotted the two-man sub farther out because we were farther in. Probably the sub was waiting for this garbage scow that goes out every day.

Marcello: In other words, when the nets would be open to let that garbage scow out, the sub was planning to sneak in?

Bow: Yes, according to the reports, you know. The garbage scow goes out every day. On his return trip, then the sub got underneath this barge. When the gates opened, he came in with it.

Marcello: I see. It seems to me that there was an awfully large area there for just one little boat to patrol.

Bow: Yes, but that's the way it was at that time.

Marcello: Did it ever occur to you that perhaps the Navy should have been using more of those little boats to patrol that area?

Bow: Well, I wouldn't know. But between the net tender, our boats, and the destroyer which was way out there, they probably figured that was sufficient.

Marcello: In other words, the net tender was always behind your little boat.

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: That is, it was closer to the harbor.

Bow: Closer to the harbor.

Marcello: Okay, did you ever hear any of the depth charges or anything that the Ward dropped during that morning after it spotted those submarines?

Bow: No, I didn't hear anything on those.

Marcello: In other words, as far as you were concerned, nothing out of the ordinary happened on that morning up until the time you were relieved?

Bow: Right, yes.

Marcello: Okay.

Bow: Everything seemed normal.

Marcello: Okay, pick up the story from that point then.

Bow: Well, we got back to the barracks, and being a Sunday, it was a skeleton crew. Most people left for the

weekend. So we ate our breakfast, and we were sitting around. Then I heard this loud sound, you know, like an explosion.

Marcello: Now where was your barracks located with regard to the ships at Pearl Harbor?

Bow: We were right next to Hickam Field where all the planes were. The United States ships were farther back.

Marcello: Could you actually see them from where your barracks were?

Bow: No. We could see part of the ships and the signal tower, and that's about all we could see from our position.

Marcello: In other words, the view that you had was almost entirely of Hickam Field.

Bow: Well, Hickam Field was right next to our barracks. The ships were, oh, four or five miles from us. When I looked out the window, when the bombs sounded, I could see smoke in the distance.

Marcello: What was your first reaction.

Bow: I told my friend, "The construction workers are sure working early this morning."

Marcello: In other words, you thought they were blasting.

Bow: Blasting, because they were doing some work in that area. And then I heard another one, you know. Then I looked up, and I said, "Hey, it looks like something is going on over there!" And just about that time, everything broke loose.

Marcello: Okay, describe what happened.

Bow: Well, when everything broke loose, they sounded general quarters, so I ran to the armory, and I picked up my rifle and my ammunition.

Marcello: Was there very much confusion at this time?

Bow: Well, I wouldn't say it was confusion because everything was . . . we were trained, you know. We'd run one way and down the other way because we were on the second deck.

Marcello: Where was your battle station?

Bow: Well, we didn't have no battle stations because we were not on the ship. But we grabbed our rifles and ran down in the street where we assembled. Of course, the officer told us to form a line because we were going to muster. So he started to call roll. He got down to the fourth or fifth name, and this plane came. He strafed the street. He said, "Take cover and fire at will!"

Marcello: So what did you all do?

Bow: So we all disappeared. I crawled right underneath a crane--a big crane--that they had alongside the road. This big Hawaiian boy that was with me, he and I crawled underneath this crane.

Marcello: How close did the strafing come to the people assembled there?

Bow: Well, I would say it was just like the movies.

Marcello: (Chuckle)

Bow: They were really kicking up the dust. I looked up and I saw the pilot, see. He was just about rooftop high.

Marcello: In other words, you could actually see the Japanese pilot?

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: What did he look like?

Bow: Well, I couldn't see his face because he had goggles on, but he looked . . .

Marcello: In other words, he looked at . . . it was an open cockpit in the plane.

Bow: Right. He looked at us, you know, and he banked to the right, made another pass, and when he came back we opened fire on him.

Marcello: About how many rifles were shooting at this Japanese plane?

Bow: I would say twenty-five or thirty from all directions. Probably a lucky bullet hit him because when he banked, he fell in behind some ships down there and never did come back.

Marcello: In other words, did you see telltale smoke trailing from behind this plane or something?

Bow: Yes. It just went down and never did come back up. All during that time, Hickam Field was burning, and all the planes was going up in flames, and fire was all over.

Marcello: Did any bombs ever hit your barracks and so on?

Bow: One big bomb missed and just hit the steps where it goes up to the barracks. We put nine or ten bed mattresses on it, and it burned a hole right through it. But it did not go off.

Marcello: The bomb never went off?

Bow: The bomb never did go off.

Marcello: What was burning?

Bow: I don't know but it had smoke coming out from the mattresses.

Marcello: Okay, so this Japanese plane makes another pass, and about twenty-five rifles fire at it, and you think you see it going down. Now pick up the story from that point. What did you do from there?

Bow: Well, it did not come back, so we figured that he went down because . . . he went down head-first, you know. I stayed underneath this crane, and no planes came back, but I could hear bombs dropping around Hickam Field, you know.

Marcello: Could you actually see very well what was going on over at Hickam Field?

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: Describe as best you can what you saw going on over at Hickam Field.

Bow: Well, people were scrambling all over the field there, and it was a mad scramble, but no planes got up in the air. Of course, everything was on fire.

Marcello: What sort of a feeling did you have when you saw what was happening there?

Bow: Well, I was real excited, you know, but I just sort of remained cool.

Marcello: Going back just a minute, another question comes to mind. I know that in a lot of cases people had trouble getting their rifles out of the armory. Did you and your buddies have any trouble getting your rifles and all that sort of thing?

Bow: No, no, we did not have any trouble.

Marcello: In other words, there was somebody there with the keys to the armory and so on.

Bow: Right, and probably a gunner's mate who had the duty that day opened it up. I got in there . . . and I had a special belt because my waist was small, and I had a special belt that I hanged in a certain place.

Marcello: I assume you were using the old Springfield bolt action rifles.

Bow: 1903 rifle, bolt action.

Marcello: Okay, did you stay under that crane then during most of the attack?

Bow: After the planes did not come back, the officer told us to go and help pick up survivors, you know. So we got

in our stake trucks, and we went to pick up survivors and see what we could do all around in that area.

Marcello: What kind of a truck?

Bow: A stake truck. Well, you know, the three-quarter-ton truck, something like that. That's what we used to carry lumber and things, you know.

Marcello: I see. In other words, you were under that crane just about during the entire attack then.

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: Or near that crane.

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: And you didn't go out to pick up survivors and so on until the attack had . . .

Bow: Until that thing was pretty well over.

Marcello: How many waves could you determine coming over?

Bow: Well, when I looked out the window and saw all this bombing, I saw the first wave in beautiful formation. Then I looked out the back, and I saw another one. Then everything broke loose. While I was running to the crane there, I didn't see no formation because I didn't take time to look (chuckle).

Marcello: Okay, so you mentioned then that after the attack was over, you were gathering survivors. Describe what you were doing here at this time then.

Bow: Well, we went to pick up whatever victims were on the ground. They said, "Put two legs here with this body and that's one. Then cover it up."

Marcello: In other words, you were actually picking up bits and pieces of bodies.

Bow: Yes, and we'd put them on this stretcher or whatever we had, and then we'd put them in this truck. After awhile there was people running all over doing the same thing. Then we quit that, and then we started to dig a trench.

Marcello: Where did you dig the trenches?

Bow: Well, we were located near the docks. It was all coral, which was a pretty hard surface, but we'd dig this trench down there just to hide in there. It was hard digging because the rock was all made of coral--white coral--but by night we had a pretty good trench dug in there.

Marcello: Describe what went on that night.

Bow: Well, since I ate that breakfast, which was ham and eggs that morning--every Sunday was ham and eggs--I didn't eat until midnight again. I was hungry all the way, but I didn't have a drink of water.

Marcello: Did you have a powerful thirst?

Bow: Yes, I was dying of thirst (chuckle). Anyway, we did what we could until night fell. Then we went down to

the docks and dug that trench, and we stayed in that trench all night waiting for the guy, but nobody came.

Marcello: What were some of the rumors that were going around in the aftermath of the attack?

Bow: Well, one of the rumors was, "They're going to come right here, right at this dock here, so you guys better be on alert!"

Marcello: In other words, you were expecting some sort of an invasion.

Bow: Right. But nobody came.

Marcello: Was there very many trigger-happy servicemen around that night?

Bow: I heard firing all over the place that night: "Anything that moves, shoot!"

Marcello: Were they the type of orders that you had?

Bow: Yes. It was pitch black, so nobody moved too often. But you could hear noises, you know, in the still of the night.

Marcello: Did you ever fire your rifle?

Bow: No, but I was always ready with it, you know. Along about midnight somebody came with crackers and, I guess, soup. That's all we had before midnight. Then we stayed there until the next morning, and nothing happened. Nobody came. While I was waiting, I thought about what happened early in the day. I was scared. I finally got scared.

Marcello: In other words, after everything had passed and you really got a chance to think about things, that's when you became scared.

Bow: I was scared then. But before that, why, I didn't have time to think about being scared.

Marcello: What sort of an attitude did you have toward the Japanese now in the aftermath of the attack? Did you think any differently of them, that is, Japanese in general?

Bow: I didn't think different of the ones I knew, but the ones in Japan, why, I wouldn't know.

Marcello: During the attack itself, did you notice any outstanding acts of either bravery or cowardice that you would like to describe or mention?

Bow: No. I believe everyone carried out their duty. I remember this one boatswain's mate. He was about six-foot-four. He ran down to this minesweeper and picked up this machine gun that was mounted on the top deck. He carried it on his shoulder and ran down the street somewhere. When this plane came, he had it like this (gesture) . . .

Marcello: In other words, he had it propped up at the airplane?

Bow: Yes, and he opened fire. This big guy, you see, he could do that--like the movies (chuckle). I was underneath this wood piling and crane, you know. I looked up and he was firing it. That's all I remember.

Marcello: Now you mentioned that you had been driving around looking for survivors and things of that nature after the attack was over. Were you doing most of this on Hickam Field?

Bow: Yes.

Marcello: What did Hickam Field look like? Describe the damage that was done there as best you can.

Bow: Well, the buildings . . . the barracks was on fire. The hangars was all bombed out, and the planes were all burned. Our people was running all over. I don't know what they were doing. I guess they were helping each other. But it was pretty wild.

Marcello: Well, Mr. Bow, I can't think of any other questions that I need to ask you. Is there anything else that you want to talk about that you think we need to get in as a part of the record? Is there anything that I missed?

Bow: I think that pretty well covered it, you know.

Marcello: Okay, well, again I want to thank you. Your comments were most candid and very interesting, and I'm sure that future scholars are going to find them very valuable.